

Localizing the Classic in Hawai‘i: Gary Pak’s Recasting of William Faulkner

by

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There is but one way left to save a classic: to give up revering him and use him for our own salvation.

—Jose Ortega Y. Gasset

Literary texts foregrounding “local” forms of thought and language gained institutional space in Hawai‘i during the late 1980s as a drive on the part of Hawai‘i-based writers for self-narration. Written from, to, and about culture in Hawai‘i, the texts were often self-consciously minor, concerned with characters on the margins, and aimed at the “survivance” (Vizenor) of local and/or indigenous communities.¹ At the same time, in part reflecting the colonial “Americanization” of the islands, many writers in Hawai‘i develop imaginative relationships to American literary forms and classics that are not simply dismissive or parodic, but instead appropriate and redirect source materials. Problems staged within American classics—particularly at the intersections of region, race, gender, development, and perception—are recast in the terms of local cultural debate or activism.

Reading authors from Hawai‘i who repurpose mainstream American narratives can be an effective way to explore with students questions of both the ongoing relevance of classics and

¹ The term “local” has occasioned much debate in Hawai‘i and should be imagined in quotes throughout, and as evolving: it is generally dated to the 1930s as a description of Hawai‘i’s largely non-white, working-class population that distinguishes it from “non-local” white settlers and tourists (Okamura 132). However, as the largely Asian-American Bamboo Ridge group gained institutional ground in the mid-1990s, its use of the term “local” was critiqued as a neo-colonial “settler” claim to indigenous lands (Trask, Fujikane). For more on teaching literatures of Hawai‘i underneath an Americanist rubric see Lyons.

the dynamics that make acts of writing and reading richly singular “events” (Attridge). When we assume that relevance ought not to be secured by a text’s status as classic, and that we must co-creatively “make” a classic relevant, the process necessarily foregrounds the cultural dialectics of reading, in which texts respond to prior texts and genres and turn (trope) them toward local exigencies. The process is doubly charged in a decolonizing space, in which, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o emphasizes in “The Quest for Relevance,” pedagogical decisions about whether to pursue aspects of “kinship” with texts coming from the colonizing culture, or to search for “liberating perspectives within which” a society clarifies its relation to itself and to “other selves in the universe” (87), are part of what can make the classroom an important site of ethical engagement. This is not of course about reducing for local comfort the complexity of acknowledged masterpieces, many of which are critical of or conflicted about their own societies, but of showing local agency at work in developing reading strategies through which the inner logics of classics might be rendered (or surrendered) within new contexts. In juxtaposition with its local, blue-collar re-configuration, Faulkner’s wry formal brilliance becomes both clearer and more problematic. The “classic” as a meditation on time and community is thus reopened to fresh readings, in keeping with Jorge Luis Borges’ insight that texts (re)create their own precursors.

Gary Pak’s “A Toast for Rosita” exemplifies how retelling a classic text for local aims can at once model an imaginative process, clarify the stakes of reading, and recruit its front row audience into engagement with community issues. Pak uses “A Rose for Emily” as narrative scaffolding from which he can appropriate forms, images, and narrative techniques, while developing an alternative mode of engaging history. A third generation Korean-local author, Pak frequently in his early stories expresses his own activist involvement in the anti-development struggles of the late 1970s through running inter-texts with renowned authors, including Gabriel García Márquez and Albert

Wendt, as well as with texts from nineteenth-century Hawaiian literature and proletarian fiction. In this, Pak develops worldly, interwoven forms of local “watching” as lines of resistance against forces which threaten alterations of the physical, storied landscapes and structures upon which continuity of culture depends.²

II

The “manners” in which Gary Pak has set up his “A Toast for Rosita” alongside of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” are evident in comparing the openings of the two stories:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years. (Faulkner 433)

When Rosita Kamali‘i died of a Valium overdose, we went down secretly to his house to pay our respects. It was night, and we parked our bicycles in an empty lot across the street. We snuck into his front yard—the grass was growing wild and knee-high—and hid in the darkness under an old mango tree. The house was dark; we knew there was no one inside. (Pak 113)

² Pak’s *The Watcher of Waipuna and Other Stories*, in which “A Toast for Rosita” (1986) was collected, won the 1993 National Book Award for the Association of Asian American studies; Pak’s subsequent works include *A Rice Paper Airplane* (1998) and *Children of a Fireland* (2004). On Pak’s references to community activism in Hawai‘i and his imaginative strategies of linking “struggles to other locations touched by globalization,” see Najita (131).

Both stories proceed by marking a death and then recollecting events that suggest why the deceased protagonist has acquired symbolic resonance in the consciousness of the community. Pak recasts Faulkner's Emily as an Hawaiian *māhū* (transvestite, gay) whose family has been dispossessed before and after the illegal overthrow and annexation of the Hawaiian Nation by business and U.S. military interests. The protagonists at first seem to represent the end of the line, Emily as "the last Grier-son" (439) and Samuel Kamali'i O'Connors (nicknamed "Rosita" in reference to his sexuality) as the last surviving son of an ali'i (chiefly) family.

However, students should be led to explore how each analogy that Pak develops between the situations (of Southern regionalism and local literature in Hawai'i) highlights a difference: to have lost the Civil War in defense of slavery does not equate with having internationally recognized sovereignty stolen. Additionally, the issue for non-Hawaiian locals is complicated by the prospect of complicity in that theft. The import of melancholic clinging to a parent who represents the old order thus in turn diverges. Where Emily appears deranged to lie with the bones of Homer Baron (who we are told "liked men" [440]), Rosita's expression of grief is culturally appropriate, and her unwillingness to give the police her mother's body resists a history of colonial violence against Hawaiian bones. That both descendants have become, paradoxically, icons and outcasts, signifies complexly as well: *māhū* were respected in traditional Hawaiian culture. Rather than becoming reclusive and living in unreality, as Emily does, Rosita (who works for the city as a "refuse collector" and is often drunk and always flamboyant) is proudly "out" and fighting. The collective's manners (or lack of them) of responding to the protagonists' deaths, then, as to the vacating of ancestral homes, largely comprises each story. The careers of the protagonists leave a trail of tropes that mark the system of exclusions, evaluations, and erroneous assumptions on which an unsustainable version of communal identity has

been based. Each story takes its tone from the implicit imagination of the kind of culture that might be built out of the ruins.

III

If, as Franz Kafka argues, fiction as a form turns the “I” madness into the “he” madness, one could argue that “local” literature expresses a “we” madness, a self threatened by divisiveness and nostalgia for damaging orders, for which, recurrently, mutual recognition and aligned purpose offers healing. As students compare the stories, they discover how, while opposing ruling class narratives, Pak appropriates and adapts the plural or choral narrator from Faulkner, recognizing its potential for representing a communal perspective, and the ways in which its narrative delimits index fault-lines. In “A Rose for Emily,” the claim to speak of “our whole town” or “our custom” immediately reveals an order predicated on gender and racial segregations. The men regard Emily less as a person than as a “fallen monument” (commemorative, protected, but toppled), and the trivialized women just want to “see the inside of her house.” Emily maintains exemption from town tax laws only by insisting on the patriarchal logic that subordinates her; the gold watch chain that runs under her waistband tethers her like an ironic umbilical cord to a history in which the defense of Southern womanhood inaugurates a series of repressions. In “our whole town” she remains less a participant than a “tableau” of a woman shadowed by her psychosexually controlling father: “Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a straddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horse-whip” (437).

In Pak’s recasting of the story, the “we” narrator represents the perspective of a group of bike-riding siblings, by implication the pre-pubescent (sexually and politically naïve) children of the neighborhood. Their parents, the adult “people of the neighborhood,” are lumped together, gossiping and attending Rosita’s funeral largely “out of blind respect” (118). The Father

represents the gruff, slow to “make trouble” attitude of the working-class community, and its reluctance to mobilize, even in its own interest. His psychic blockage emerges most directly in relation to Rosita’s sexuality, which he fixatedly references (“Dat fricken mahu. Dat crazy mahu” [125]). Only when enraged by the “palapala” that suggests that “the state will run us ovah” (122), literally dividing and paving over the neighborhood with a freeway, does the community sign Rosita’s petition, though it will not join him in protest.³

This leads to Pak’s central tableau, in which the reader is shown Rosita “leaning against the statue of Father Damien, the leper priest, a pile of picket signs neatly stacked next to him. Across on the other side of the plaza, some haole tourists were posing for a group picture” (124). In referencing the now sanctified Catholic priest who lived as *kōkua* (one who helps others) with victims of leprosy, Pak evokes a history of resistance to the self-appointed Provisional Government’s lack of caring; draws an analogy between leprosy and the hysteria, homophobia, and talk of quarantines surrounding the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s; and foregrounds systems of representation themselves. How Hawaiians and Hawai‘i are regarded is shown as largely a question of viewpoint, given the long and ongoing history of corporate-driven touristic representation, in which Rosita is more likely to be presented as a crazy Hawaiian than passionate leader. Ironically, it is tourists, including literary tourists, who cling to the unreality of such distorted images, even while they have themselves become part of the picture. Most importantly, Pak’s tableau suggests that the local needs for its own survival, sustainability, and evolution to recognize its affiliations with

³ “Palapala” (letter, document) like many of Pak’s references, would have resonance to those familiar with Hawaiian history: the longstanding resentment that “paper” can take land is reflected in the famous phrase from Queen Lili‘uokalani’s protest anthem, “palapala ‘anunu” (greedy document). Likewise, resistance to building freeways such as H-3 has historically been a site of local-Hawaiian coalition.

Hawaiians, and in doing so to recover forms of heroism, leadership, and resistance. Against those who remain obsessed with static versions of the past, he presents a vision of those demanding change for the future.

IV

In “A Reflecting Story,” Pierre Bourdieu describes “A Rose for Emily” as richly pedagogical, and highlights the ways in which, in marking the construction of time, Faulkner forces readers to reflect on temporal aspects of narrative: “far from offering a ready-made theory of time, which only needs to be made explicit ... [the story] force[s] the spectator to make this theory him or herself” (375-6). In contrast to Jean-Paul Sartre, who refers to the story as a “jumble of time,” that is, Bourdieu sees Faulkner’s story as self-consciously concerned with the creation of “habitas,” and with enacting stylistically the ways that the past keeps resurfacing in and constituting the present.

In repurposing Faulkner’s story, with fidelity to local language, foods, foliage, and socialities, Pak likewise emphasizes the ways in which, since the community exists in, through, and in relation to the history whose effects it lives out, it is crucial to turn history toward progressive ends “in time,” or before it runs down. Rather, it must be rewound (wound back into sync with its sources) to preserve and perpetuate a hopeful future. Pak’s text is less concerned then with marking chronological time, or with the ironic postponement of information characteristic of Faulkner, than with political consciousness as it “grows up” against forms of “progress” that want to transform local culture into versions of themselves. The years since Rosita’s death aren’t specified, but the choral voice has come of political age, so that it can retroactively juxtapose references to significant events in Hawai‘i history with the stages of its own increasing awareness. The narrators recall how as boys, even when hearing how development threatened the mango trees and buffalo grass of their world, it was “abstract,” and they “could not concep-

tualize it too well” (121). However, Rosita’s insistence that “the ‘āina belongs to the people, stop the freeway!” (125) continues to resonate with them, as does the empowerment they recall feeling when they signed Rosita’s petition: “We let that feeling shine in us a long time” (123). Against Faulkner’s concluding image of a communal perspective that inclines inward in its necrophilic fascination with Emily’s “strand of iron-gray hair,” Pak shows his narrators discovering an agency that might expand into contexts beyond the regional frames of the story, modeling community activism against “the cold hand of the unknown” (126).

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